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Is *Manfred* in fact a tragedy? Some do not believe so. David Perkins states that *Manfred* stands to "more earnest poetry as melodrama does to tragedy."[1] And M.S. Kushwaha says of *Manfred* that it "may be called a tragedy only because it ends in death."[2] Goethe, however, in his review of *Manfred*, refers to it as "Byron's tragedy."[3] And Samuel Chew speaks of it as reaching "the heart of the tragic idea."[4] Perhaps the two sets of readers are operating from two different conceptions of the genre. Yet each reader, no doubt, upon examining the poem, felt that he recognized how it should be classified. One of them calls it, in effect, a melodrama; one, a tragedy. Which is it?

One way to answer the question is to compare the poem to a definition of tragedy. Before doing so, one must settle on a definition. There are several. The most famous, of course, is that of Aristotle, which concerns classical tragedy. Is it likely that a drama composed by Byron, who is considered the epitome of Romanticism, should meet the standard laid down by Aristotle, who is considered the epitome of Classicism?

In 1815, Byron was appointed to the subcommittee managing Drury Lane theater. Here, he had a chance to review scripts submitted for presentation and to see the dramas performed on stage. Much of what he saw disgusted him, for it was melodrama indeed. Byron, in reaction, determined to reform the English stage by writing plays of his own (Chew, pp. 31-36). In fact, by the time he departed England for Italy, Byron had made up his mind to write plays that could stand as models for future English dramatists to imitate.[5]

In Italy, Byron read the tragedies of Alfieri, who had written in imitation of the Greeks. If a reader would understand my conception of tragedy, Byron says, "Take up a translation of Alfieri."[6] Like Alfieri, Byron also looked to the Greeks for inspiration. In January 1821, writing to his publisher, Murray, Byron states that he hopes to revive the English tragedy:

> I am, however, persuaded, that this is not to be done by following the old dramatists, who are full of gross faults, pardoned only for the beauty of their language; but by writing naturally and *regularly*, and producing *regular* tragedies, like the Greeks; but not in *imitation*,—merely

> the outline of their conduct, adapted to our own times and circumstances, and of course *no* chorus. (Steiner, p. 203)

Thus, it should come as no surprise if *Manfred* does in fact adhere, more or less, to rules laid down by Aristotle. But does it do so? Let us consider.

In *The Poetics*, Aristotle states that tragedy consists of six elements: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song.[7] *Manfred* does contain song (I i, II iii, II iv). About song, however, Aristotle says almost nothing. He simply observes that song, or music by itself, sometimes occurs in tragedy and that it is pleasurable (p. 41).

About spectacle, the philosopher also says little. What he does say is disparaging. Of all the elements of tragedy, spectacle has the least to do with the art of poetry. In fact, he states, "the power of tragedy is independent both of performance and of actors" (p. 41). In *The Poetics*, Aristotle makes this point again and again, emphasizing that a tragedy can elicit pity and fear whether the play is seen, heard, or read. For this reason, although *Manfred*, a chamber-drama, is without spectacle, it cannot be ruled out as a tragedy on this point.

Upon turning to diction and thought, Aristotle gives these elements short shrift. For Aristotle, thought is the content of language; diction, the decoration thereof. Although thought is important, because it is through this element that pity and fear are awakened, Aristotle refers the reader to his treatise on rhetoric; for, an analysis of the thought in language more properly belongs to the study of rhetoric (pp. 57-58). Whether Byron uses the element of thought in a way that Aristotle would call tragic, depends on whether the play awakens pity and fear. This point will be considered later, under the heading of plot.

As for diction, Aristotle dismisses it, stating, "the poet's art is not seriously criticized according to his knowledge or ignorance of these things" (p. 58). And since diction is of no account to tragedy in general, it is of no account to this argument.

Of the six elements of tragedy, Aristotle considers character second in importance only to plot (p. 40). Of character, Aristotle states this. A man of wealth and reputation, the tragic hero must be conspicuous for neither virtue nor vice, but must fall because of some error (p. 48). Does Manfred fit this description? He does belong to the nobility. Like his father before him, Manfred is a count. The family has been titled for centuries.

But is Manfred good? Or rather, neither too good nor too bad but falling by error? This is not entirely clear. For what has he done? The

crime is only hinted at. This much can be pieced together. Long ago, outside the action of the play, Manfred fell in love with a female relation, the Lady Astarte. She resembled him very closely, therefore suggesting a very close relation. For loving Manfred, the Lady Astarte was slain by someone, whom Manfred in turn slew.

Therefore, it is hinted that Manfred has committed incest. Probably the incest was discovered by a father, brother, husband, or lover, who killed Astarte; Manfred killing him.[8] Yet it is never made clear that this scenario is the case. And if it is indeed the case, the circumstances surrounding it, by which one could judge the actions as good or bad, are missing entirely.

This vagueness would seem to prevent a judgment about character, but it does not prevent the reader from coming to a conclusion about Manfred—by means of feeling. That Byron does not allow the reader to witness the crime, that he does not allow the reader to hear, after all these years, so much as a full account of it, places the reader at a distance from the crime. One cannot witness the suffering of a victim; one can only witness the suffering of the killer, Manfred, for whom one can and does feel sympathy. For the suffering Manfred undergoes is tremendous. As a result, the reader views Manfred, not as a criminal, so much as a fellow human-being in pain. Thus, because of the way Byron presents the facts of the case, the reader can feel that, yes, a crime may have been committed, but the man who has committed it, is not therefore irredeemably evil.

As the reader continues to follow the action of the play, the feeling that Manfred is neither too good nor too bad is continually reinforced. The words of Manfred himself show him to be both good and bad. At one time he states, "I have done men good" (I i 17); and at another, he states, "I have ceased / To justify my deeds unto myself— / The last infirmity of evil" (I ii 27-29).

On the one hand, Manfred believes he cannot enter heaven; for when he attempts suicide, he states, "Farewell, ye opening heavens! / Look not upon me thus reproachfully— / Ye were not meant for me..." (I ii 107-09). On the other hand, Manfred believes he cannot be taken to hell. When he is dying, the demons come to take him away, but Manfred spurns them, saying, "Thou hast no power upon me, *that* I feel; / Thou never shalt possess me, *that* I know" (III iv 125-26).

In fact, although Manfred descends to the very underworld itself, presenting himself before Arimanes, prince of demons, Manfred refuses to bow to him and even invites Arimanes to kneel, with Manfred, before the "overruling Infinite" (II iv 48). Thus does Manfred show respect for God, even in the presence of evil incarnate.

Later, when Manfred knows he will soon die, he addresses an encomium to the sun. In doing so, he shows respect for its Creator:

> Most glorious orb! that wert a worship, ere
> The mystery of thy making was revealed!
> Thou earliest minister of the Almighty,
> Which gladdened, on their mountain tops, the hearts
> Of the Chaldean shepherds, till they poured
> Themselves in orisons! Thou material God!
> And representative of the unknown—
> Who chose thee for his shadow! (III ii 9-16)

Manfred also shows respect for the church. The Abbot of St. Maurice, he receives cordially, saying, "welcome to these walls; / Thy presence honors them, and blesseth those / Who dwell within them" (III i 21-3). But Manfred rejects the Abbott's offer of absolution, saying finally, but again cordially:

> Old man! I do respect
> Thine order, and revere thine years; I deem
> Thy purpose pious, but it is in vain:
> Think me not churlish; I would spare thyself,
> Far more than me, in shunning at this time
> All further colloquy; and so—farewell. (III i 154-159)

Immediately thereafter, the Abbot shows that he too thinks Manfred a mixture of good and evil, as he comments on the state of his soul: "It is an awful chaos—light and darkness, / And mind and dust, and passions and pure thoughts / Mixed..." (III iii 104-106). Thus, Byron gives the reader a hero neither too good nor too bad.

Even Manfred's almost pathological aversion to mankind is balanced by his treatment of the Abbot and the Chamois Hunter, a treatment sometimes rough but also kindly and respectful; by his undying love for Lady Astarte, though forbidden; and by his respect for the Creator, although he does not believe the Creator can take away the sins Manfred has committed.[9] At first glance, the play may give a reader the feeling that, where the character of Manfred is concerned, the scales are tipped on the side of evil. A closer reading will show that the balance between good and evil is very nearly even.

Manfred is conspicuous for neither virtue nor vice; but does he fall through error? Aristotle equates calamity with suffering, especially by wounding or death (pp. 46-47). Manfred does die, but is this a calamity? Throughout the play, he has sought to die: at first to find

oblivion; then, as Astarte promises, to put an end to "earthly ills." Finally, his wish is granted. For him to die, then, cannot be called a calamity. It does not necessarily bring suffering. It may in fact be a movement away from suffering.

The calamity that befalls Manfred is the death of Astarte. This brings forth Manfred's suffering. And why? Not only is the one he loves taken from him, and possibly made to suffer for sins she may have committed with him, but also Manfred holds himself responsible for her death. He states, "If I had never lived, that which I love / Had still been living..." (II ii 193-194). Knowing this, Manfred also suffers from guilt. Therefore, the reversal occurs at Astarte's death, and the calamity, in the form of suffering, goes on throughout the action of the play.

Manfred does fall, then, but by what error? That he loved Astarte at all, apparently a very near relation, is the result of his holding the taboos of mankind so lightly. And this is the end-result of pride: "I disdained to mingle with / A herd, though to be leader—and of wolves. / The lion is alone, and so am I" (III i 121-123). Through pride Manfred is alienated from mankind, loving only the one whom mankind has forbidden to him. This is the error by which he falls.

But it is also pride that gives Manfred power and magnificence; power, from seeking knowledge beyond that considered proper for mankind; magnificence, from insisting he must stand alone, without help of any kind, even that of God. Pride, then, raises Manfred high, but it also brings him low.

Finally: of all the elements of tragedy, Aristotle states, "the most important is the plot, the ordering of incidents; for tragedy is a representation, not of men, but of action and life..." (p. 39). Under the heading of plot, Aristotle gives many suggestions as to how a play should be constructed in order to realize excellence in tragedy. Although it might be possible to demonstrate that *Manfred* meets many of the requirements for excellence, it is the purpose of this argument to demonstrate that the play is or is not a tragedy. If the incidents of a play are so arranged as to produce fear and pity, then the play is tragic in effect. Setting aside any other consideration, let us consider whether *Manfred* does produce fear and pity.

Through pride, and defiance of taboo, Manfred has apparently fallen in love with a kinswoman, whom he therefore has caused to be killed. Possibly a kinsman has killed Astarte; possibly Manfred has killed him. Is this the stuff of tragedy? Aristotle, in considering what kind of incidents best bring forth fear and pity, notes that "when the sufferings involve those who are near and dear to one another, when for example

brother kills brother, son father, mother son, or son mother...then we have a situation of the kind to be aimed at" (p. 50). This play, then, contains the very stuff of tragedy.

But the crimes are presented sketchily and are committed long ago, as background to the action of the play. In the action of the play itself, are there any incidents that bring forth fear and pity? There are some scholars, it is well to remember, who would deny this.

Yet there can be no question that Manfred suffers. For much of the play, he is in torment. The action of the play consists of Manfred, in one way or another, seeking an end to the torment. To watch him suffer—a man with whom the reader can sympathize—is to feel pity.

Byron introduces the word "pity" into the play five times. At II i 90, the Chamois Hunter sympathizes with Manfred, saying, "My prayers shall be for thee." But Manfred counters, saying, "I need them not— / But can endure thy pity." At II iv 69, the First Destiny states that Manfred is "a thing which I, who pity not, / Yet pardon those who pity." At III i 50, the Abbot argues that "there still is time / For penitence and pity," that is, penitence by Manfred and pity from God. At III i 93, Manfred compares himself to Nero, and the Abbot to the soldier who tried to save the emperor from suicide: "a certain soldier, / With show of loyal pity, would have stanched / The gushing throat...."

Thus, Manfred receives pity from the Chamois Hunter (a layman) and from the Abbot (a churchman). There is a suggestion of pity even from a fiend. And it is stated that the Deity would pity him, too, if only Manfred would repent. To witness others pitying Manfred, confirms and reinforces the pity a reader may already be feeling. Pity, therefore, certainly can be produced by the incidents of the play.

What of fear? Is it also produced? Aristotle states that fear is awakened by witnessing the suffering "of someone just like ourselves..." (p. 48). Is anyone just like Manfred? Hardly. Yet it can be argued that Manfred is a symbol of mankind, falling through pride and struggling toward atonement—or else, through pride, refusing it. And, at least according to Christianity, this is the situation of every man, woman, and child on the planet. In this, perhaps, can be seen an opportunity for everyone of us to identify with the hero and thus to fear, both for the hero and for ourselves.

But does Manfred himself ever show fear? When threatened by the fiends in hell, Manfred is in control. When he is dying and the demons come to take him, he is in control. Early on, when he attempts to kill himself by leaping off the cliff, he comes close to giving up control and thus to awakening fear in the audience; but he is snatched back from the act. Manfred has so much control over the forces around him that

he simply cannot feel fear. And neither can the reader, for long. As soon as it becomes obvious that Manfred is in control of the matter, fear fades away. Thus, if *Manfred* fails to meet the standard of tragedy laid down by Aristotle, it may be on this point. The pity is strong; but the fear, questionable.

However, there is the matter of the star. Does it merely influence the hero? Or actually control him? For if it does control him, then fate is inevitable. Suffering is inevitable. And this is a situation that could befall anyone. With this the reader can identify, and for this, feel fear.

At I i 110, the Seventh Spirit states, "The star which rules thy destiny / Was ruled, ere earth began, by me...." Here, the star is said to rule Manfred's destiny, that is, to control it. But then "The hour arrived" and the star became "a curse." Was it Manfred's crime that changed the star? No. The star is said to rule the hero's destiny and not *vice versa.* According to the spirit of the star, then, Manfred is controlled by fate.

Later, when the hero calls up the Witch of the Alps, she addresses him, saying,

> Son of Earth!
> I know thee, and the powers which give thee power;
> I know thee for a man of many thoughts,
> And deeds of good and ill, extreme in both,
> Fatal and fated in thy sufferings. (II ii 33-37)

She who says she knows him, states he is "fated" to suffer. Again there is the suggestion of control. And if control, then inevitability.

In this case, Manfred seems to be controlled by a force outside of himself. He can control particulars, enough to make a decision, enough to make an error, but in general the suffering he undergoes seems to be uncontrollable. He must simply endure it. This is a situation any one of us can identify with. For this, one can feel pity—even fear.

Thus, in almost every way, the play seems to meet the standard of tragedy: not romantic tragedy, but classical tragedy, as defined by Aristotle himself. This finding is remarkable, since Byron, quoted earlier, states that he does not intend to imitate the Greek dramatists point by point, and yet in many ways he does just that. This finding is also remarkable because it demonstrates yet again what many a scholar specializing in Romanticism has come to realize: that Romanticism can best be understood, not as a polar opposite to Classicism, but as a phenomenon which has grown out of it. Classicism is the fertile soil in which Romanticism has taken root; and often—more often than one

might ordinarily suspect—it is possible to trace resemblances between the two as between the parent and the child.

However, if *Manfred* should in some ways deviate from the standards of *The Poetics*, let Byron speak for himself: "...as I have a high sense / Of Aristotle and the Rules, 'tis fit / To beg his pardon when I err a bit" (*Don Juan* I CXX). He was no doubt jesting when he wrote this; but, as often in Byron, there is truth in the jest.

NOTES

[1]Perkins, ed. *English Romantic Writers* (San Diego, 1967), p. 784.

[2]*Byron and the Dramatic Form* (Salzburg, Austria, 1980), p. 95.

[3]Cited by Perkins, p. 810.

[4]*The Dramas of Lord Byron: A Critical Study* (1915; rpt. New York, 1964), p. 149.

[5]William Calvert, *Byron: Romantic Paradox* (Chapel Hill, 1935), pp. 157-158.

[6]George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London, 1961), p. 212.

[7]Aristotle, "On the Art of Poetry," in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. and ed. T. S. Dorsch (New York, 1977), p. 39. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

[8]See II i 84-85: "My injuries came down on those who loved me— / On those whom I best loved...." Is the plural "those" suggesting, besides Astarte, a kinsman was killed? It is ambiguous.

[9]For proof, see the passage beginning at III i 66: "Old man! there is no power in holy men, / Nor charm in prayer, nor purifying form/Of penitence...."